

Evangelicals embraced a like-minded pope

by [Daniel Burke](#) in the [March 20, 2013](#) issue

As word spread in February of the pope's resignation, many evangelicals lamented the impending loss of a powerful spokesman for their conservative causes.

"Pope Benedict XVI has exemplified moral courage and an unwavering commitment to the gospel message," said Ralph Reed, chairman of the Faith and Freedom Coalition, a conservative Christian political group. "We honor him for his lifelong service to the Lord and his inestimable intellectual contribution to Christian orthodoxy."

The high praise—"evangelical Benedictions," you might say—extended beyond U.S. borders as well.

"I appreciate his courage of ideas, even when they did not resonate with contemporary attitudes," said Geoff Tunnicliffe, secretary general of the World Evangelical Alliance. "I was especially moved by his boldness in warning us of the dangers of moral relativism and the tyranny of self-centered ideologies."

Just a generation or two ago, such lavish praise might have been unthinkable. During the 1960s, evangelist Billy Graham—sometimes dubbed the Protestant pope—took heat for inviting Catholics to join his revivals. But after the modernizing reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), denominational barriers fell and ecumenism prospered.

Meanwhile, evangelicals developed an appreciation for Catholic culture, and Catholics found ready evangelical allies in the battles against secularism, abortion and gay rights.

"One of the challenges of evangelical Protestantism as it became a political force was to find a vocabulary to talk about the role of Christian faith in a diverse, pluralistic society like the United States," said R. R. Reno, executive editor of *First Things*. "By and large, they turned to Catholicism."

First Things founder Richard John Neuhaus was a key figure in bridging the gap between Catholics and evangelicals. Along with the late evangelical activist Charles Colson, he formed Evangelicals and Catholics Together in 1994, a group that bonded in part over shared admiration for the late Pope John Paul II.

More recently, Catholic, evangelical and Orthodox leaders backed the Manhattan Declaration in 2009, a document that professes their common support for “the sanctity of life, traditional marriage and religious liberty.”

The political fruits of evangelical-Catholic marriage might be seen in the presidential candidacy of Rick Santorum, who enjoyed strong backing from evangelicals, even as he struggled to connect with fellow Catholics.

Which is not to say that evangelical leaders are about to “swim the Tiber,” as they say, and convert to Catholicism.

“At least one of the many faults of the papacy is the idea that a monarchical head can speak for any church,” R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, said February 11. Still, the evangelical leader balanced his doctrinal critique with the kind of praise voiced among allies in today’s culture wars.

When Benedict visited New York and Washington in 2008, evangelical theologian and Fuller Seminary president Richard Mouw said the pope “has an important pastoral role in the broader Christian community. In many ways and on many subjects, he speaks for me.” —RNS

This article was edited on March 13, 2013.